

Reflections on the use of *Thespesia populnea* as wood for carvings on Easter Island

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It is a paradox that botanical determinations in the last ten years on numerous sculptured objects from Rapanui have not revealed the frequent use of a choice wood, *Thespesia populnea*. Recent analyses of a baton or *ua* of ancient manufacture permitted the investigation of the role of this exceptional sculptural material on Easter Island.

The object, recently identified as being made of *Thespesia populnea* (family *Malvaceae*), is a baton, or *ua*, measuring 141 cm long; it is from a private collection (G.L.L. 17426/200026). The modeling of the heads is particularly fine, enabling us to suggest that this work of art dates from the first European contacts. The object is sculpted in a pinkish wood, characteristic of *makoi*, the name the islanders gave to *Thespesia populnea*, the 'rose wood of Oceania'. This wood, sometimes the color of salmon, has the slight perfume of a rose, and is a material of very fine grain that carves easily and takes a beautiful polish.

Polynesian sculptors had particular affection for this wood. In Tahiti and the Marquesas it was used in a sacred context to fashion *ti'i*, anthropomorphic figures of a religious character (Orliac 1986a;1990:38) and in Mangareva, for offering pillars set up at places of worship (Orliac 1986b). According to Henry (1968:198, 201), *Thespesia populnea* was also used for making the staff of the *ari'i*, or supreme divine chief of Tahiti. This staff, cited in the ethnohistorical literature although not one specimen is known in existing collections, functioned as an emblem and symbol, like the *ua* or baton of Easter Island. In effect, this baton, as used on Easter Island, functioned in ceremonies to make rain fall, and was also a true scepter, an attribute representing the social power of the king (*ariki*) of the island.

Oral tradition and ethnohistory show that *Thespesia populnea* was a sacred tree in Polynesia, planted in cult places, or *marae*. In Tahiti, this tree--indispensable for rituals--has different names (one of those is *toromiro*) depending upon the place in which it was planted on the monument. Sacred to Tane (Parkinson 1797,I: 79), one of the major gods of Polynesia, it was equally considered as the emanation of Roro'o, another Tahitian deity that inspired the priests in their devotions (Henry 1968:394). According to Henry, the tree dedicated to Tane was the *Fagraea Berteriana* (ibid.:67,164,363).

Thespesia populnea was necessary to the edification and decoration of platforms for offerings placed before the



Figure 1. *Ua*, ht. 141.3 cm; 18th century, wood and bone. Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris.

ahu, the most sacred part of the sanctuary. The pillars were very likely made of this wood as they were in Mangareva. The leaves of *Thespesia* were set out on the edge of the platforms, and during ceremonies the "priests named in rotation the god to whom one of the leaves was dedicated" (ibid.:168). Under each altar post, called *fata ai'ai*, "was buried a stone wrapped in one or two leaves of the most sacred *miro* (*Thespesia populnea*) called *iho* (essence) of the sacred altar". (ibid.:142). The branches and leaves of this tree were also used at numerous important ceremonies, notably human sacrifices, the *Pai'atua* (that is, the renewal of the wrappings which covered the image of the tutelary god), the investiture of an *ari'i*, and for the ceremony of marriage (ibid.:307,169,199,290).

Thespesia populnea is a tree that is very widespread in Polynesia, but due to its eminently sacred character, it is difficult to say if it was brought by man or was native to Rapa Nui (Zizka 1991:18). Like sandalwood, *Makoi* was perhaps already on Easter Island long before the arrival of the first immigrants; perhaps also it was part of the indispensable plants that the Polynesians placed on their imposing boats before setting out on their conquest of the Great Ocean.

Whether brought by man or found in the new territories, the 'rose wood of Oceania' without doubt rapidly came into competition with a wood that was unknown in other Polynesian archipelagos: *Sophora toromiro* (*Sophora tomentosa*, *Sophora chrysophylla* and *Sophora tetraptera* also grow in Polynesia but, to our knowledge, their wood was never used for sculpture). This tree, from the family *Leguminosae*, produces a very hard wood with a very fine grain, ranging in color from dark pink to blood red. It is interesting to note that this *Sophora* bore the same name in the vernacular as *Thespesia populnea* in Tahiti when the latter was planted in a sanctuary: the name *toromiro*, which designates these two trees, is translated in both cases as "sap, blood of the tree"; there is no doubt that this designation is in direct relation with the color of the wood in both of these trees. It is, however, legitimate to wonder about the type of *Sophora* that used to bear this name on Rapa Nui; did it refer to all *Sophora* of the island or, as was

the case in Tahiti for *Thespesia populnea*, was the name reserved for sacred trees planted in proximity to the *ahu*? If the term *toromiro*

designated the sacred trees, it is likely that one or several other Rapanui names were given to the trees that grew in a profane context. It is probable that the leaves and branches of the Rapanui *toromiro* were used for rituals, whereas the "wood of blood" was used to make objects of sacred character and perhaps also offering platforms as in Tahiti.



Figure 2 Detail of ua. Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris.

Xylological analyses have demonstrated the frequent use of *Sophora toromiro*, notably for making anthropomorphic statuettes (*moai kavakava*, *moai tangata* and *moai papa*) and batons (*ua*) (Orliac 1993:203). By way of contrast, microscopic studies rarely detect the presence of *makoi*, with the exception of one other baton or *ua* of a very recent style (C. Orliac; private collection, unpublished study) and of the Vienna tablet (ref. 22869) (Lavachery 1934:68). According to

S.R. Fischer (1993:178) this tablet as well as that of Vienna ref. 22870 are of *Thespesia populnea* or *Podocarpus latifolia*. The analyses carried out at the Paris Museum of Natural History in 1933 by Guillaumin identified *Thespesia populnea* for at least one of these two objects (Orliac 1989:2). This surprising absence might be explained by the fact that *Thespesia populnea* is a relatively fragile wood and preserves poorly, which is why such a low proportion of ancient objects have come down to us. It could also be the case that *makoi* was used for making small numbers of very particular objects which were absent from domestic rituals. These rare objects would therefore not have been exchanged during contact with Europeans. Or it may simply be that the "rose wood of Oceania" was not prized by Rapanui artists who preferred another wood for carving, *Sophora toromiro*.

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